

BIANCAMARIA RIZZARDI

TRACES OF DANTE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

An Overview

ABSTRACT: The essay intends to offer an overview of Dante’s influence on nineteenth-century English poetry, highlighting the various appropriations and introducing a discussion on individual authors. Dante’s presence is an essential pivot in the development of modern and contemporary culture as, during the nineteenth century, Italian literature seem to flow into English literature and at the same time represent a great moment in world literature. Furthermore, with the birth of the United States, the great English tradition converges with the American literature and therefore the whole focus of Western and also contemporary culture relates to an extraordinary basin in which the set of sources that complement each other, in particular Dante and English literature, establish a fundamental element for understanding the imaginary itself not only of the twentieth century but also of the contemporary one.

KEYWORDS: Dante, Romantic Poets, Victorian Poets, Victorian Women Writers.

A great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight.

Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (Hermon 2005, 367)

Describing the history of Dante’s presence in England, Pietro Boitani defines it as a “love story” (2011, 127): and, in fact, as the critic indicates, neither French, nor Iberian cultures, nor the Germanic, the Slav, and Scandinavian cultures – have an equally ancient and intense, though complex and controversial, relationship with Dante. This is due to Dante’s penetration in England since the days of Chaucer and decisively confirmed by all the great classics of that literature (Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, up to and beyond Joyce, Eliot, Pound and many contemporary poets) who drew heavily on Dante’s model, making use of many motifs, themes and subjects, including: the infernal vision, the ecstatic ones of *Paradise*, the sufferers of *Purgatory*, the memorable autobiography of *Vita*

Nova. I would say that there is no theme within the great classics of English literature, that has not found and made some reference to Dante.¹

An exemplary case of this vital influence for English literature (and beyond)² is the relationship which the great Romantic poets³ and the Victorian English ones⁴—and one could also say American—had with Dante. It is an essential pivot in the development of modern and contemporary culture as, during the nineteenth century, Italian literature seemed to flow into English literature and at the same time represented a great moment in universal literature. It should be borne in mind that, with the birth of the United States, the great English tradition converges with American literature and therefore the whole focus of Western contemporary culture is linked to a set of sources that integrate, usually effectively, what could be defined the conjunction of classical Italian literature - in particular Dante - and English literature establish a fundamental element for understanding the imaginary for the twentieth century and beyond.⁵

If we wanted to try to reduce the reverence of the Romantics and the Victorians for Dante solely to the literary dimension, we would be forced to consider a minimal, albeit significant, segment of a far-reaching phenomenon. The best minds of nineteenth-century English society knew and, not infrequently, studied and cited the *Divine Comedy*.

In 1843, an anonymous reviewer, commenting on the translation of the *Inferno* by John Dayman who had defined Dante “the great Father of Modern Poetry”, (1843. vi) underlined how, in essence, Dante was closer to the English than to the Italian temperament: “His manner is English: it is more direct, more concise, graver, than that of his countrymen in general; and though there are glimpses of passion, tender as well as fierce, his nature was less voluptuous and enjoying”.⁶ Behind the reviewer’s words we see a kind of amazement at the fact that such a genius could not be.

¹ Regarding relations between Dante and English Literature see Toynbee 1909; Id. 1921; Dedeyan 1961; Id. 1983; Praz 1962, 63-94; Brand 1965, 163-200; Ellis 1983; Griffiths and 2005; Wallace 2007, 281-304.

² On Dante’s influence in Europe during the nineteenth century, see the collected essays edited by Aida Audeh and Nick Havely 2012. The book emphasizes the importance of a multidisciplinary and multilingual approach to the subject of Dante and nineteenth century nationalisms.

³ See Pite, 1994; Braida, 2004.

⁴ See Milbank, 2009. In this ground-breaking book, Alison Milbank explains why a comprehension of the Victorian reception of Dante is essential for a full understanding of Victorianism as a whole. Her focus on this much-neglected topic allows her to reconfigure the British nineteenth-century understanding of history, nationalism, aesthetics and gender, and their often-strange intersections. The account also builds towards a demonstration that the modernist perpetuation of the Dante obsession reveals an equal continuity with many aspects of Victorianism. The book provides not only an authoritative introduction to these important cultural themes, but also a re-reading of the genealogy of literature in the modern period. Instead of the Victorian realism challenged by Modernist symbolism’s attempts to transcend linear time, Milbank offers us a contrary, continuous ‘Danteism’. See also Coluzzi 2021.

⁵ On particular aspects of my discussion, I refer the reader to Kirkpatrick 1995; Brand 1957; Vassallo 1984; Webb 1976; Sperry 1988; Praz 1942; McDougal 1985; Charity 1974; Manganiello 1989; Reynolds 1981; Heaney 1985, 5-19.

⁶ [Unsigned review], *Spectator*, XVI, p. 788

In this essay I have decided to dwell on Dante's traces in the sense that Dante himself gives to the word "traccia", where in *Inf.*, XVIII, ll.79-80, he writes "Del [= dal] vecchio ponte guardavam la traccia / Che venìa verso noi da l'altra banda", ("From the old bridge we ey'd the pack, who came. From th' other side towards us"), trace in this case "group of people", of writers, who proceed in line through the century and who are clearly visible to us even today.⁷

As Alberto Casadei rightly pointed out (2010, 45), the whole of the Dante model over the course of the twentieth century became increasingly present in elective forms of affinity (or, conversely, differentiation), this is due to what has been defined a real "Dante-mania" or, as Foscolo defined it, "Dantelatria"⁸ that characterizes the English nineteenth century in which, despite the remoteness of cultural paradigms and historical conditions, universality (in various senses) and visual power (even visionary) have established themselves as determining factors to justify the strength, the power of Dante's poetry.

We are dealing with a period in which it is said that at least one third of the population of Florence was British or American; the British lived the myth of Italy, obviously accompanied by the myth of the great Italian artists, and musicians. These myths made Italy, in particular in the English world of the nineteenth century and then in the American one, the ideal place to which everyone belonged. And to this was added a maximum attention to a political view of Italy. In that period the first ideas of the Risorgimento began to appear in Italy, and the idea of fighting for the unity of the country. England, both at the level of the people and of the intellectuals, would always be at the side of Italy and, this particularly applied to men of culture, such as poets and writers, most famously Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, the Rossettis, Tennyson, the Brownings, Swinburne and so many others.

A sort of preliminary debut could be seen in the work of the great visionary, poet and engraver, and also a great interpreter of literature, William Blake. Blake (who had read Dante in Henry Boyd's translation of 1785)⁹ was entrusted by the painter John Linnell with the task of illustrating the *Divine Comedy* in 1824. No less than one hundred and two engravings illustrating some memorable episodes of Dante's *Inferno* were completed before his death in 1827.¹⁰ Furthermore, it was precisely his work on Dante – defined in the *Dantesque Encyclopedia* by Fortunato Bellonzi (1990) as "the greatest Dantesque

⁷ In this regard, see the excellent collection of essays edited by Audeh and Havelly 2012.

⁸ "Oggidi, che la venerazione a Dante salì a superstizione, a vera Dantelatria..." (Foscolo 1928, 50).

⁹ For a general picture of the interest in Dante in the second half of the 1700s, v. Toynbee 1909 (the second volume); Marshall 1934; Praz 1962; De Sua 1964. In particular: Toynbee 1903.

¹⁰ There are 102 watercolours (72 for *Hell*, 20 for *Purgatory* and 10 for *Paradise*), some pencil drawings, 7 engravings; to all this are added some "annotations" or fragmentary notes present in incomplete drawings, and although these are "working" notes - but perhaps for this very reason - they are precious inasmuch as they contain observations of the poetics underlying the pictorial interpretation. In the mare magnum of studies on the subject, among the most recent, see the useful summary accompanied by an extensive bibliography by De Santis 2018.

iconographic monument of the modern age”, which, in the space of a few decades, transformed Blake from an eccentric and little known poet to a British icon and an internationally renowned artist.

This combination of Blake’s poetic insights and his illustrations of the *Comedy* made proselytes in English culture (a paradigmatic example, is Rossetti, who considered him his hero) and established Dante’s function, of his *Comedy* in particular, amongst the great intellectuals of the time.

One of the main financiers of the first Italian struggles for independence was Byron, - a radical *sui generis*, a kind of Vittorio Alfieri of English literature. Byron, like many other intellectuals, had a particular passion for Dante, translating and then using him - as Shelley would do, or as Derek Walcott would do, to cite one of the many examples of from the 20th century—putting the use of the Dantesque tercet back into circulation in English literature. Therefore, Dante was also an influence from a metrical point of view and not only, since many of his poems hinged on a vision of existence that is even titanic, restoring the influence of the great figures of the *Comedy*. Byron’s *The Corsair* (1814) would be incomprehensible without the Dantesque epigraphs which begin every canto, as would be the *Prisoner of Chillon* (1816) without the episode of Ugolino.

I would also like to mention Byron’s poem in four cantos *The Prophecy of Dante* (1821) which was immediately translated into Italian¹¹ and which circulated in many European languages. In this, Byron, as was customary in the literature of the time, imagined himself to be the dying Dante and making a prophecy about the future of his fame and of Italy itself. Such an image of a Dante, with whom Byron identified himself, a suffering exile who prophesies about his death and the fate of Italy, is the subject of this extraordinary poem that would have great fame in England in its day. Perhaps today it is less known, but it is certainly significant in enabling us to understand the radical importance of Dante to the culture of the great poets.

2021 marked the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death; it also marked the bicentenary of Keats’ death. In his poetics, Keats, who walked through Scotland reading Dante in Carey’s translations, adopted various themes, subjects and stylistic choices attributable to Dante¹²: his sonnet “A Dream, After Reading Dante’s Episode of Paolo and Francesca” of 1818¹³ is exemplary. We also have his notes to the text of Carey’s *Inferno*, from which he drew inspiration in the attempt to write his epic work, *The Fall of Hyperion* (composed in 1815 and which remained unfinished).¹⁴ In *Endymion* (1818) the poet referred to a model of allegoresis

¹¹ For the first Italian translation see Da Ponte 1821. See also Saglia 2019.

¹² Gittings (1956.) gave a detailed study of Keats’s markings in a copy of Dante’s *Inferno* translated by Cary. He showed us by tracing Dantean echoes in many of Keats’s poems that the influence of Dante on Keats was deeper than previously supposed.

¹³ Published for the first time by Leigh Hunt in *The Indicator* 28 June 1820, it was later included in the 1848 edition.

¹⁴ See Saly 1965, 65-78.

and the myth of love, and of beauty, which is partly inspired by Dante's suggestions, particularly in *Paradiso*.

One could not conceive of Tennyson's *Ulysses*—to which I will return shortly—without mentioning its main source, Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), a poem which is part of the history of world literature, to which they will all return, and which encompasses many Dantesque themes. It was Coleridge himself who wrote in the margin “from Dante” and introduced a Dantesque simile from the *Inferno* that makes the reader understand that it is from the Hell that the Ancient Mariner finally leaves to carry out his earthly adventure. As had happened to Dante's Ulysses, the boat of the protagonist of the ballad finally sinks in the whirlpool.¹⁵

The main theme is, therefore, that of the journey beyond all limits, represented by the journey of Ulysses in the twenty-sixth *canto* of Hell which will remain for a long time in the culture of all centuries and above all in modern and contemporary culture, a sort of narrative archetype to challenge the laws and the limits of nature with the strength of one's reason and with the passion for one's ideals. (I think that even the same titanic but powerless challenge of man through the creation of an entity that should have been superior, is found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) which also draws inspiration from Dante's Ulysses to challenge the rules of nature or man's limits which, however, cannot be overcome).

Coleridge puts the theme of travel at the centre of the narrative, obviously fundamental in a colonial, oceanic and maritime culture like the English one, but at the same time charges it with metaphorical values that reflect Dante's themes. These start with the landing in unknown lands, and with the challenge posed also by sin, the guilt of which the sailor stains himself with by killing the albatross, and by the expiation of which he must take into account. Sin and atonement are fundamental themes in the *Comedy* that all these poets read in excellent translations: either that of Henry Boyd who translated the *Inferno* in 1785 and the entire *Divine Comedy* in 1802; or that of Francis Carey which appeared between 1805 and 1814. The theme of atonement would long remain a dominant theme in the imagination of English and American literature of the following century and beyond: and still today many of the most famous television series produced by the great platforms of various kinds of dramatic genres, have the central theme of sin and atonement, with deep Dantesque roots.¹⁶

A further trace of Dante can be found in the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley. The appeals for freedom and against corruption made by the political Dante, and the prophet

¹⁵ *Hell* 21, ll.25-30; *The Rimes...*, ll. 446-451.

¹⁶ I mention only one of the latest television series that have had a great success for the high quality of the script which is *The Sinner* (2017) which represents sin, the sinner as from the title itself and which is built with a Dante mechanism; but I could also mention the last two or three seasons of *Game of Thrones* (2011). Still others are the television series in which Dante's themes are clearly present, as in *SnowPiercer* (2020) or in the film *Parasite* (2019), both texts based on atonement, on guilt and on the division between guilt and punishment. Dante's culture adds matter and imagination to the imaginary of the Protestant tradition which insisted a lot on this.

Dante, are important matters for Byron as for both Percy and Mary Shelley herself, and we find them expressed in similar ways, in the poetry of Auden, Spender and Cecil Day Lewis.

The relationship between Dante and Shelley,¹⁷ is made clear in his fundamental work on the theory of literature entitled *A Defense of Poetry* (1821)¹⁸: which sees poetry an essential tool to the understanding not only of life and oneself but which glues together the different forms of human knowledge. Having established this vision of the centrality of poetry, and of literature generally, Shelley refers first of all to Dante who had made the centrality of literature the very meaning of his life and his work. Shelley wrote two extraordinary statements following Dante's practice: the first that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world",¹⁹ that is, it is the poet who, in interpreting the world, hands it over to us in order that he and we will be better able to live in. His task is to speak out, to fight, to legislate, unheeded, it is true, but as an invincible witness to his ideals. (As it will be, among others, also for Louis MacNeice or for Wallace Stevens in the 1900s).

Moreover, in defining Dante, he writes that he is a "bridge thrown over the stream of time, which unites the modern and ancient world;"²⁰ and further, calls Homer the first and Dante the second epic poet whose works are related to the sentiment and religion of their respective age. Again, Dante is the first religious reformer, the first awakener of entranced Europe, who "created a language in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarisms."²¹ There could not be a better definition of Dante because Dante is precisely this, the Dante that brings us together here, that is, avoiding cataloging him in banal and trivial periodizations, he is really a bridge that connects the most ancient age with the modern one.

Furthermore, in his best poems, Shelley uses abundantly the idea of the dream / vision, the great medieval genre to which, in a certain sense, the *Comedy* itself also belongs. It allows the great ability to represent truths, positions, characterizations of man in the world and in the cosmos through a series of metaphors and allegories. In some of Shelley's best poems—well translated into Italian by Francesco Rognoni (1997)—this theme is relevant, sometimes also described in Dante's tercets. Dante is the main point of reference: suffice it to mention the *Ode to Liberty* (1820), the *Ode to the West Wind* (1820) and other compositions, in which Dante's visionary nature, its allegorical charge are precisely taken up by Shelley to propose them in a new key. In the *Ode to Liberty*, for

¹⁷ Shelley used to read Dante in the english edition *Delle opere di Dante Alighieri con le annotazioni del dottore Anton Maria Biscioni*, Venezia, Gatti 1793.

¹⁸ The essay was written in response to his friend Thomas Love Peacock's article "The Four Ages of Poetry", which had been published in 1820. *A Defense of Poetry* was eventually published, with some edits by John Hunt, posthumously by Shelley's wife Mary Shelley in 1840 in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* by Edward Moxon in London.

¹⁹ Op. cit., p.90.

²⁰ Op. cit., p.60.

²¹ Op. cit., p. 66.

example, freedom is a sort of *persona*, who speaks like Justinian in the famous canto VI of the *Paradiso* (ll. 1-96). How can one forget the extraordinary poem by Shelley *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation* (1818-19) in which there is a somewhat infernal journey that ends in a madhouse with a madman who seems reminiscent of Torquato Tasso, a figure so dear to the poetics of the Romantic authors? In the encounter and dialogue with this character we find the mechanism, both technical and structural, with which Dante, in the *Inferno* in particular, together with Virgil, addressed his characters; there is even the technique of an interview with a character that he finds in a sort of infernal environment. (How can we not think of the meeting with Stateman “there I saw one that I knew and stopped him crying ... of verses 69-70 of *Waste Land*? Or the meeting that Herbert Reed describes with the “dead masters” in *To a Conscript* 1940? Or again that *Strange Meeting* by Wilfred Owen?)

These are (interconnected) aspects of nineteenth-century poetics, which combined the aspirations for renewal typical of every era with a long-lasting but not rigidly binding tradition, often acquired thanks to the perspective comparison with the Dante model.

This is evident, suffice it to cite a single example, in Carlyle’s third ‘lecture’ “On Heroes and Hero-Worship” (1841), dedicated to Dante and Shakespeare, entitled ‘The Hero as Poet’. From the critical-philological point of view, the operation carried out by Carlyle is an act of misreading, that is, a distorted reading of the Supreme Poet that he carries out with the aim of bending the figure to his ideological design. Carlyle aspires to present Dante and Shakespeare as models which, in terms of the mere ethical-behavioural code, Victorian society cannot help but confront. For this reason, in years in which England offered shelter and support to many Italian exiles, the figure of Dante as an exile stimulated Carlyle’s thought and imagination. For him, Dante was a ‘hero’ who, haughtily rejecting any compromise with power, consistently accepted the bitterness of exile for the sake of his ideas.

In the reading that Carlyle proposed of Dante’s life, it is evident that for him the figure of the hero is constituted around the image of the exile who, despite the adversities of the world, finds in the writing of the *Comedy* the highest point of the realization of his ‘heroic’ mission, which manages to speak to all men, overcoming sectarianisms and partisanship, placing at the centre of his search a universality that invariably implies the precious gift of a truth that can be shared by all men of all ages—the one that offers, as Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* would say, “the lamp of truth” (1849, vol. 8, 231). And it is Ruskin, another great sage of the Victorian era, who will succeed Carlyle in this precise perspective of Dante’s dialogism.²²

In this regard, it is essential to refer to the fascination of Dante also present in the poetesses as well as in the English female narrators of the time. Here the subject becomes complicated: if in the eighteenth century in general, and in particular among female

²² For the relationship between Carlyle, Ruskin and Dante, see the detailed contribution of Marroni, 2009, 243-254.

writers, Petrarch was preferred to Dante, because he was the love poet par excellence and therefore the privileged teacher of romantic, sentimental lyric poetry, during the whole of the nineteenth century “Dantolatry” had its obvious repercussions also among English poetesses and novelists.

It was Maria Francesca Rossetti who reiterated, in the preface of her *A Shadow of Dante* (1871), how the value of Dante’s work went far beyond the limits of a nation and an era: “Dante is a name unlimited in place and period. Not Italy, but the Universe, is his birthplace, not the fourteenth century but all Time is his epoch”.²³

In short, by making Dante the poet who had been able to speak to the whole world and to all peoples, Maria Francesca Rossetti aimed at convincing the English not only of the importance of Dante studies, but also of the validity of both his cosmology and his high ethical-religious teaching.

Furthermore, reading Dante led to an idea of nation and national culture in a period in which women played an active and growing role as cultural creators and mediators. If the interpretation that the nineteenth-century English female artists made of Dante speaks of their aesthetic concerns, there is no doubt that it also influenced their act of self-positioning within the overlap between national and international culture.²⁴

Proof of this can be seen in Anna Seward’s correspondence²⁵ with the great translator of Dante Henry Frances Cary; or in the poem by Felicia Hemans “The Maremma”²⁶, in which the poetess retells the story of Pia de’ Tolomei (*Purgatorio* 5.133) in her poetic and even Shakespearean idiom, making it extremely national. It is evident in the preparatory work for the novel *Valperga* (1823) which Mary Shelley did by reading *Le Cronache fiorentine* by Giovanni Villani (1348): the results of her research were published in an essay in the same year. Elizabeth Barrett Browning used tercets in *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and, in several of her lyric compositions, makes precise allusions to Dante’s *Comedy*. George Eliot in *Romola* (1863) experimented with various ways of incorporating Dante, using scenes that reflected those of the *Comedy*, or echoes, paraphrases, and direct quotes from Dante, often used in epigraphs. In some of her other novels (*Middlemarch* 1871, *Daniel Deronda* 1876, *Felix Holt* 1866) Eliot makes many specific references to Dante.²⁷

All this had probably been increased by the female “Introductions” to Dante, among which, in addition to the aforementioned *A Shadow of Dante* (1871) by Maria Francesca

²³ See Marsh 1994, 392ff.

²⁴ In this regard, see Saglia, 2012, 184-203.

²⁵ Twentieth-century scholars have frequently had recourse to Seward’s epistolary references to Dante in order to probe the extent of his presence in Romantic-period-culture. Her remarks have often served to demonstrate that late eighteenth-century commentators evaluated him especially in terms of contemporary taste for, or critique of, the gothic and the macabre. See Seward 1811.

²⁶ The poem published in *The Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1820, was inspired by Foscolo’s essay on Dante in the *Edinburgh Review*, February 1818 and offers probably one of the most significant female-author appropriations and recreations of a character from the *Commedia*.

²⁷ In this regard, see the interesting essay by Marroni 1996.

Rossetti, there was *Dante* (1898) in the Blackwood edition of the series “Foreign Classics for English Readers” edited by Margaret Oliphant. As has been shown, in this period, the “female popularizers” produced a large number of Dante translations and rewritings, both in prose and verse, as well as in theatrical works, and thus in a certain sense passed the baton to poets such as Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath who, as a young student enrolled at Smith College in Northampton, (Massachusetts) discovered Dante and was struck by the *Divine Comedy*, as we can read in the story *Mary Ventura and the Ninth Kingdom* (written in December 1952). The inextinguishable force of Dante’s poetry in female writing can be read today in the poetry of Louise Gluck, Nobel Prize for Literature in 2020, and author of *Vita Nova*, (1999).

Taken as a whole, all these women writers, through their reading of Dante, broadened their intellectual and creative horizon to reflect, first of all, on the concept of nation as a fundamental framework for the political identity of their ideological and literary interventions. Their appropriation of Dante constitutes a series of attempts to define a position of female cultural authority within both the national and international dimensions. There is no doubt that female writers, through Dante, acquired greater interest in some of the central issues of nineteenth-century literature and politics: and they did so in ways that stand comparison with, but also differ from, the well-known and studied approaches to Dante by male writers who have long been the focus of academic study and critical discussion.

The centrality of Dante, therefore, meant above all the centrality of a very specific cultural tradition: in this sense, all the Rossettis felt that they were its almost exclusive custodians. Maria Christina Rossetti,²⁸ authoress of *Monna Innominata* (1881), in an article dedicated to Dante which appeared in the *Century Magazine* in 1884, reviews the contribution made by her family to the development of Dante’s studies in England:

My father, Gabriele Rossetti, in his “Comento Analitico sull’inferno di Dante” has left to tyros a clue and to fellow-experts a theory. My sister, Maria Francesca Rossetti, has, in her “Shadow of Dante” eloquently expounded the *Divina Commedia* as a discourse of the most elevated faith and morals. My brother Dante has translated with a rare felicity the *Vita Nuova* . . . and Other (political) works of his great namesake. My brother William has, with a strenuous endeavour to achieve close verbal accuracy, rendered the *Inferno* into English verse.²⁹

Undoubtedly, in its biographical exceptionality, the Rossetti family represents a unique case in the history of English literature. It is not simply a question of highlighting how two important literary traditions under the sign of the Rossetti meet and face each other, but of realizing the considerable contribution that they, by virtue of this encounter,

²⁸ The analysis of Dantesque loans in *Monna Innominata* (1881) deserves a separate discussion, in which it is possible to focus fully on this literary dialogism that marks the moment in which, with more intensity and conviction, Christina Rossetti decides to confront tradition to verify, in the living body of writing, the ability to “bring together” two languages, two cultures and two mentalities. Marroni also dedicated a detailed treatment to the relationship between Dante and Christina Rossetti in 2002, 261-282.

²⁹ Christina Rossetti, “The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem”, in *Century Magazine*, XXVII, February 1884, p. 566.

made to the artistic research of the nineteenth century. In fact, their re-reading of Dante led to a radical change and an extraordinary development not only in the literary sphere but also in the pictorial sensitivity, as is masterfully testified by the intense dialogue that the main artistic current of the time, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, undertook with the poet. Dante Gabriel Rossetti had the merit of making the *Vita Nova* and the cult of Beatrice fashionable in England,³⁰ themes explored and propagandized by his translations, his paintings and his poems. John Ruskin wrote about him in his autobiography which appeared in 1899: “[Dante Gabriel Rossetti] was really not an Englishman, but a great Italian tormented in the Inferno of London» (1985, 451). If his *House of Life* (1881) in verse is profoundly inspired by Dante’s work, no Englishman of the nineteenth century or the following has ever been able to forget his painting *The Salutation of Beatrice* (1880-1882), or the painting of 1871, kept in Liverpool in the Walker Art Gallery, *Dante’s Dream*.

From this moment on, it will no longer be surprising to find Dante in the very heart of the English. If the Brownings kept a portrait hanging in their Florentine home, and Robert builds a *Sordello* (1840) around and against the figure of Dante, Gladstone, the great Victorian Prime Minister, translated parts of the Comedy and confessed to having learned “at the school of Dante a great part of the necessary preparation for politics”.

There is an anecdote told by Hallam Tennyson, in his *Memoir* of his father (1906, 102): Tennyson was standing beside his friend Edward Fitzgerald, “looking at two busts of Dante and Goethe in a shop window in Regent’s Street”. Fitzgerald asked: “What is there wanting in Goethe which the other has?”. Tennyson replied: “The Divine!”

I would say that precisely this aspect, the divine, is what Tennyson faced in his *Ulysses*, whose very first source is Dante’s Ulysses. Faced with Dante’s text, as is natural, the Victorian poet prepared for small and large changes, interventions that also involved the fundamental meanings of the episode of the *Comedy*, which I have had the opportunity to address elsewhere.³¹

From a structural point of view, the interest in Dante contributes to intensifying in the Victorian poet the taste for symbolic correspondences and geometries that Tennyson first, and later Joyce, will assign to numbers. One, three and nine, on which the architecture of the Comedy is based, are also the numbers on which that of the Victorian Ulysses hinges: there are three main characters, Ulysses, Telemachus and the crew of his

³⁰ Moreover, Dante Gabriel Rossetti had found in the poet and painter William Blake a possible possessor of his soul. Blake's poetry had become accessible to a larger public from 1839 when *Songs of Innocence* were first printed in ordinary type. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Rossetti, at the age of 18, was offered the chance of buying for ten shillings Blake's own note-book, he enthusiastically accepted. He kept the precious volume with him for the rest of his life. Obviously, "the 58 leaves crammed full of Blake's sketches and scribbings" (Preston 43) had a deep and lasting influence on the young painter-poet, whose imagination had come to dwell on an intriguing coincidence: Blake had passed away on 12th August 1827, whereas he, Rossetti, was born on 12th May 1828, exactly nine months later. Could it be possible that the soul of Blake had been intercepted at the moment of his conception? Preston suggests that Rossetti treasured the idea that he could be a reincarnation of Blake (38-41).

³¹ Rizzardi 2019, 135-154.

companions. The structure of the text is tripartite. Finally, there are three moments in the narration, the three main acts into which the work is divided. From 3 + 3 + 3 we get nine, which is the perfect number squared. It goes without saying that the reference to perfection, in Tennyson as it will be in Joyce, and unlike Dante, must refer not to God, but to Art, and more specifically, to the ambitions of poetry, to which the Tennysonian ending clearly alludes.

Tennyson also worked and reworked the individual images, the background of the story. What in Dante is a geographical obsession, pointing to the West, turning the stern to the morning, becomes in the English text a temporal coordinate, in which the old age and the approaching death of the protagonists overlap at the time of the fixed departure. at sunset, at the end of the day (ll. 54 ff.). The goal, therefore, is not Dante's "new earth", but a land, a "newer" world.

The Homeric-Dantesque hero is projected towards endless exploration, nothingness and death, making the mad flight, "folle volo" [*Inf.* XXVI.125] of Dante's Ulysses. In fact, the explicit purpose of Ulysses is to "sail beyond the sunset", in Dante's words "di retro al sol", following the sun, [*Inf.* XXVI.117], making the long journey prophesied by Tiresias. Ulysses in Tennyson decides to go beyond that sunset in which the sublime sense of being resides. He decides, like Zarathustra, to "go down". Dante thus finds himself, by an English hand, a prophet of modernity: his Ulysses becomes a forerunner of Milton (whose words Tennyson's monologue ends with), and of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, thus taking, in the Western imagination, the pre-eminent place that belongs to him next to that of Ugolino and Francesca.

This powerful presence of Dante in nineteenth-century English culture entered directly into the great twentieth-century tradition and then into the contemporary one. In the twentieth century, thanks to the work, as we have seen, of the great Dante workshop that was the previous century, Dante's poem is still a decisive model as it manages to express a tension to the absolute that does not cancel history but includes it in its narrative path, placing it as an indispensable premise of a logical and at the same time visionary discourse, which wants to push itself to the limit of the ineffable. And that's right. "The genuine impression of the modern man when meeting in Dante," – says Contini (2001, 110-11) – "is not to come across a tenacious and well-preserved survivor, but to reach someone who arrived before him".

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